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# A Director's Guide to the Galaxy: Navigating the Drama of a Performance Organization

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# **A Director's Guide to the Galaxy: Navigating the Drama of a Performance Organization**


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## Abstract

For four years, I worked with several of my peers to formulate the student organization, Drama L'Orange (DLO). The group is designed to provide non-theater majors with an opportunity to pursue the art that they love, from both a performance and technical aspect. In order not to conflict with the already established group, First Year Players, DLO does not perform musicals, and contrary to their prerogatives, our group is open to all years, even graduate students. The objectives of the group are to involve as many people as possible with a passion for theater. However, we also have a high standard for quality. The drive to put on superior amateur theater has led this group on a very interesting path this year, and this paper is a compilation of snapshot reflections of the experience, to be expanded upon in detail. More information about the group and my directing within it, presented from an objective journalistic standpoint, is available at <http://newshouse.syr.edu/story.cfm?storyID=208&chapterID=1> and the subsequent related links on the right side of the page.

Dennis Rosenblatt, a successful freelance television director, once told me that a director's job is delivery, and I find that statement as applicable to theatre direction as it is to any other medium. There will always be obstacles that arise during production, either financial, technical, or personnel-related. However, an audience will not take any of those complications into consideration when viewing the final product. An audience comes to a play to be entertained, and it is the director's job to guide everyone involved in the production towards a cohesive final performance that will do just that...entertain.

The creative experience begins with a determination of who will work on the production. The casting process is a difficult one, because it involves anticipating a performance from individuals months after auditions based on just a few short minutes of spontaneous performing. It involves making many decisions based on assumptions of how well a particular actor will take direction or work with others or comprehend the intricate details of their role.

The casting sessions for Drama L'Orange were always eventful. For our debut production of *Noises Off*, we faced the unfortunate consequences of being a new student organization with minimal resources for publicity. As a result, we auditioned a select number of very talented individuals but ended up short one male actor. At this point, we were faced with a fairly significant decision early on in the process. Did we want to compromise our standing as a legitimate group performing this play by casting different genders in an already established and well-known piece? Did we want to hold a second round of auditions and jeopardize our relationship with those who had made the effort to come to our first round? Since the group was newly formed and this was our first such issue, our choice of action would set a precedent for future group policies. After much

deliberation, our final decision was to cast a very qualified female actor in a traditionally male role, that of Lloyd Dallas. The result of this choice was a well-acted final production, but one which received a lot of publicity for its gender construction rather than its theatrical proficiency.

We again faced difficulty when it came time to cast *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*. This time around the auditions were better publicized, and we approximately tripled the amount of candidates for roles in the show. This created the need for a callback. The post-callback deliberations were both intense and lengthy. This was definitely one point in the process where my authority as director and co-president of the organization were beneficial. Throughout the casting process, we made a concerted effort to be as impartial as possible; for this reason, several of the actors from Noises Off, our first production, were not cast in The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940.

Part of the reason that the casting process took so long was the result of our detailed efforts. However, another reason for the difficulty that we faced was that we wanted each staff member to be completely satisfied with our collective decision, since each of us had to work in such a concentrated space with these individuals. The final decision came down to our second lead female role. There were two candidates, and both were very personable and talented, but each portrayed the role of Elsa very differently. After hours of debating, we were unwilling to let either actress go. The deliberation finally ended when I made the spontaneous decision to change our casting for our female lead and replace her with one of the girls that we were torn between for the other role. The result of this decision was that the girl who we had previously planned on casting as the star was not even included in the production, but as soon as we reached the consensus

on this course of action, it felt as though a weight had been lifted off of our shoulders. The reason for the casting decision was two-fold. The girl that we ended up going with for the part had a tremendous amount of chemistry with her character's romantic counterpart, which our original choice lacked. Also, the original choice for the role was a very short girl, whereas the male actor she was to play off of was very tall and lanky. In the casting process, we did not value typecasting overly much, particularly as we cast a brunette in a role meant for a blond, a half African-American girl as a Bavarian woman, and a Caucasian in a role meant for an African American man. However, in terms of the romantic storyline, we were insistent upon the leads looking as though they belonged together, and the height difference would have complicated both their blocking and their on-stage relationship.

Yet, even after the rigors of initial casting, we faced dilemmas. The biggest shake-up occurred a mere couple of weeks after we began rehearsing, when one of the cast members in our ensemble was forced to quit the play for academic reasons. The options that we as an executive staff had to consider were the consequences of miscasting someone who we had not cast after the initial audition in this role, hosting a second batch of auditions (which would not be fair for those who had auditioned at our first call), or a less traditional third option, which was to cast one of my two assistant directors in the role. The latter decision is the one that we eventually chose.

While auditions are a challenging time for a director, the work only just begins with this experience. I would describe my personal directorial style as eclectic, a combination of various influences from various theatrical programs and even from multiple continents. In retrospect, I am able to identify specific lessons that I learned

from working with various directors as an actor, at varied stages in the process. For instance, in high school, I participated in the musical theater program. I worked with a director who had very interesting and unique practices, particularly for a director working with amateur actors. Firstly, he rarely concerned himself with the consideration of the ensemble, leaving the management of their blocking and organization to his assistants. He often did not know their names or faces and treated them with less attention than his leading actors. Additionally, he gave his principle players a strangely significant amount of autonomy for individuals with such little experience. He often let them block solo numbers or determine their behavior primarily on their own. Every actor, regardless of experience or the size of their role, needs direction, and his tendency to ignore that fact was distressing to me. Granted, I made a concerted effort to individualize the attention that I provided each actor with, regardless of the size of their part. Yet, I was faced with challenges that a staff or faculty director is exempt from.

Directing fellow students is a situation that requires implicit trust and cooperation from the group. Often there are other qualified individuals with extensive theatrical knowledge who have trouble conceding to the direction of a peer. Also, it is difficult to deal with attitude problems among the cast, because without paying the actors, their obligation to the production is voluntary. Although I tried to follow methods dictated by director Viola Spolin in her instructional book on directing in order to make my voice as the director one that was recognized by the actors as a sound of influence early on in the process, in the production of The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940, sometimes the actors challenged my authority. In one specific instance during tech week, an actor asked me for my permission to change a line about a character's eyes so that it applied to his

hair instead. I declined to approve this request and instructed that the line should remain intact. The next time we practiced the scene in question, the actor changed the line in spite of my direction, and when I asked him about his decision, he angrily protested that his choice was the right choice. My staff respectfully was silent so that I could handle the situation in my own way, but when two of the actors requested that he stick to the original script, this individual snapped at them, ordering them to “stop trying to diffuse the tension in the room.” I very calmly instructed the actor that the line was to stay the same, and that, while I could not control his actions while he was on stage, I expected him to respect my wishes. I also opened the door for him to speak to me about the matter privately afterwards. This particular actor caused many problems throughout the process. He did not learn his lines until days before the show, overshadowed other actors on stage, and took the overt sexuality of his character to such an intense level of expression that he made the other actors uncomfortable. In addition to his behavior when in character, he was generally either lethargic or argumentative during the rehearsal down time.

This individual was not the only actor who caused difficulty during the process. One of the actors involved in the process was previously intended to assistant direct the production of Musical Comedy Murders of 1940 after having acted in Noises Off. Through our personal friendship, I was aware that this performer was having multiple personal issues outside of the context of the play, particularly wrestling with his recently diagnosed bipolar disorder and the ineffective medication that he was on. Sometimes his condition would manifest itself during rehearsals, unintentionally, but in such a way as to make the other actors, who were unaware of the situation, slightly uncomfortable. On occasion, his difficulties would manifest themselves as a defensive or argumentative



response to an acting note or criticism. More notably, his reactions were apparent in his behavior regarding an energy warm-up that we started rehearsals with on a regular basis. The exercise was led by a fellow cast member, who had introduced us to it, and involved a call-and-response activity, both vocally and incorporating physical movement. We called the exercise “Sweeping the Broom,” because that was one of the motions that it entailed. James, the actor in question, did not find this activity as energizing and motivational as the rest of the cast did, and on several occasions vocalized his frustration with it, spontaneously and angrily. In private conversations, he became very upset about his erratic behavior and his inability to control it. He talked to me about how to communicate with him better given his situation, but the individual attention that he sometimes required conflicted with my ability to deal with the rest of the cast.

Aside from the aspects of directing that involve managing the individuals involved in a project and the creative cohesion of a production, there are also the aspects of directing that involve instruction regarding acting techniques and work on character development. When dealing with these areas, I often referred to the teachings of Sanford Meisner, who was an original member of the Group Theatre, founded by influential acting teachers Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, and originated the Meisner Technique of acting. While I never studied with Meisner himself, I studied screen acting with an acting coach in London who advocated many of Meisner’s techniques and found them in practice in my Syracuse University acting classroom as well. Additionally, Meisner wrote a book, On Acting, which expresses the principles of his method by transcribing the events of his actual classes.

The premise for his teachings is that “acting is the ability to live truthfully under

imaginary circumstances,” which correlates with his belief that “the foundation of acting is in the reality of doing.” These particular expressions were very important to my communication with my casts, especially as they rehearsed without tangible sets and props at the beginning of the rehearsal project.

Another Meisner principle that held particular weight in my direction of The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940 cast is one that I paraphrase as a direction to not make apologies on stage. This particular play involved a large amount of stage combat and complicated blocking. My first directive regarding apologies therefore originated in the intimate nature of our stage and audience. Due to the proximity of the audience to the actors, it became necessary to block certain conventions such as slaps and shoves as realistically as possible, rather than contriving to manipulate the audience’s viewpoint and utilize “stage” contact. Sometimes, during rehearsals, an actor would use too much physical force, and then consumed with worry for their scene partner, would break character to apologize to their scene partner. The actors would need to be reminded that their scene partner is already aware that their actions were not intentional and that a break in character just cannot happen. One of the fundamental factors of rehearsal is that it establishes habits, which manifest themselves during performance, when actors experience a rush of nervous energy and revert to their comfortable default behaviors. The general principle of “practicing like you perform” is a major reason that apologizing on stage is inexcusable. In addition to slowing down the progress of the scene, it increases the likelihood of such a slip out of character during performance if something were to, as it invariably does, happen unpredictably onstage. Another reason for the discouragement of politeness on stage is that it inhibits the freedom with which actors can

relate to each other. Their concern for each other is an expression of their individual sensibilities as actors rather than an emotion that would be appropriate for their respective characters, which means that they are inhibiting themselves from being fully immersed in the persona of their roles.

In addition to, in my opinion, an appropriate condemnation of social niceties between actors onstage, the Meisner Technique encourages the actors to not speak, act, or react in a scene until something happens to make them, either situationally or as the result of the actions of his or her scene partner. In Meisner's opinion, preparation for a scene only carries an actor into the first moments of a scene, where they are forced to re-evaluate their character's emotional and physical state as a result of what happens to them. This focus on motivation for change was a constant in the direction of Musical Comedy Murders. For instance, one actor in the play developed his character as an antsy individual and incorporated a lot of movement into his portrayal. Therefore, when directing him, I always had to make sure that he was aware of his motion and that each time he crossed the stage, the movement was motivated, either internally or externally.

The root of the Meisner Technique, however, lies not in motivation but repetition. A primary exercise involves sitting opposite a partner and making an observation about their physical appearance or behavior. This observation is repeated by the individual whom it was made about, and then by their scene partner, until the line changes on its own and acquires meaning.

An important aspect of directing is the ability to delegate. In the process of directing Musical Comedy Murders of 1940, I was able to assign my assistant the significant role of taking care of pacing. Pacing is crucial to the ability of the audience to

comprehend the plot and for the humor of the jokes to be appropriately conveyed.

Therefore, it was invaluable to have someone else focusing on it. A lot of directors have difficulty with stepping back at certain parts of the process. However, the role of director is so multifaceted, as the above examples of casting, technique, and personal dealings imply, that perhaps one of the most relevant skills for a director to possess is the ability to manage it all.